
3 Nephi 24 — Like a Refiner's Fire — The Messenger of the Covenant and the Windows of Heaven

3 Nephi 24: Jesus commands the disciples to write the words of Malachi (chapter 3), which the Father had given the prophet, so that the Nephites would have them. He then expounds them. The Father declares he will send his messenger to prepare the way, and 'the Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant.' But who may abide the day of his coming? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, purging the sons of Levi that they may offer a righteous offering. He will be a swift witness against sorcerers, adulterers, false swearers, and those who oppress the hireling, the widow, the fatherless, and the stranger. 'For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.' He calls them to return: 'Return unto me and I will return unto you' — but they ask, wherein? In tithes and offerings, which they have robbed from God. He commands: 'Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse... and prove me now herewith... if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it.' Those who feared the Lord spoke often together, and a book of remembrance was written for them; they shall be his jewels in the day he makes them up, spared as a man spares his own son. The chapter is the Father's word through Malachi — the refining Messenger of the covenant who purifies, the unchanging God who does not consume his people, the call to return and to bring the tithes, and the book of remembrance of those who feared the Lord.

This chapter is Malachi 3 — the words of the last of the Old Testament prophets, given by the Father to Malachi, and now given by the risen Christ to the Nephites so that they too would have them. Christ specifically *commands* that they be written and then *expounds* them, which tells us how important he regarded these particular words. And they are rich: the prophecy of the *Messenger of the covenant* who comes to his temple like a *refiner's fire*; the great declaration *I am the Lord, I change not*; the tender call *return unto me and I will return unto you*; the famous promise about *tithes* and the *windows of heaven*; and the *book of remembrance* written for those who feared the Lord. The chapter is a tapestry of judgment and mercy, refining and blessing, the unchanging God calling his wandering people home.

Hebrew Word Studies

tsaraph (צָרַף) — "to smelt, refine, test, purify (metal)" — **tsaraph, to refine metal by fire, smelting away the dross to leave the pure ore; by extension, to test and purify a person as fire purifies silver. The refiner sits over the fire, watching, until the metal is pure vv. 2–3 (he is like a refiner's fire... he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver).** The image of the Lord's coming as a *refiner's fire* runs on the Hebrew *tsaraph*, "to refine, to smelt," and it is one of the most searching and most hopeful pictures of God's dealing with his people in all of scripture. *Tsaraph* is the metalworker's word: to take ore mixed with dross, heat it in the furnace until it melts, and skim away the impurities so that the pure silver or gold remains. It is a process of fire — intense, transforming, purifying. And the Bible uses it constantly for God's testing and purifying of his people. *Thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us, as silver is tried (tsaraph) (Ps. 66:10); I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine (tsaraph) them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried (Zech. 13:9); the words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried (tsaraph) in a furnace (Ps. 12:6).* The refining fire is how God *purifies* — and several deep truths are folded into the image. First, the fire is *necessary*. Silver in its raw state is bound up with dross; only the fire separates them. So the *trials* and *afflictions* of life, and the *purifying presence* of God's holiness, are the fire that burns away the impurities of the soul — and they cannot be skipped, for there is no refining without heat. Second, the fire is *not destructive but purifying*. The refiner does not want to *consume* the silver but to *cleanse* it; the fire destroys only the *dross*, and the pure metal emerges *better* than it went in. This is the crucial difference between the *refiner's fire* and the *consuming fire* of judgment: the refiner's fire purifies the precious metal; only the *stubble* (the next chapter's image) is burned up entirely. To the faithful, the fire is *refining*; to the wicked, it is *consuming* — the same divine holiness, opposite effects, depending on whether there is precious metal to be purified or only dross to be burned. Third, and most tenderly, *the refiner sits and watches. He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver (v. 3)* — the refiner does not abandon the metal to the fire but *sits over it*, attentive, watching, controlling the heat so the silver is not damaged. There is an old and beautiful tradition that the refiner knows the silver is pure when he can *see his own face reflected in it* — and so God watches over the refining of his people until his own image is reflected in them, until they are made pure enough to bear his likeness. The fire is real, the heat is intense, but the Refiner is *present*, watching, never letting the fire do more than purify. And the *purpose* is the offering: *that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness (v. 3)* — the refining makes the people *fit to worship*, pure enough to draw near. This is why the coming of the Messenger of the covenant is both fearful and good: *who may abide the day?* — because he comes as fire; but the fire is the *refiner's fire*, the fire that makes precious, the fire over which the Refiner sits and watches until his face is seen in the silver. To be refined by God is to be *purified, not destroyed* — to have the dross burned away and the pure self revealed, made fit at last to offer a righteous offering and to bear the image of the One who sat over the fire until it was so.

From the Chapter's Architecture

“cross-references *Mal. 3 (the source of the whole chapter); Mal. 3:1; Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2 (I send my messenger... to prepare the way — the forerunner and the messenger of the covenant, v. 1); Ps. 66:10; Zech. 13:9 (thou hast tried us, as silver is tried — tsaraph... I will refine them as silver is refined — the refiner's fire, vv. 2–3); Ps. 12:6 (the words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace — the refining, v. 2); Mal. 3:6; James 1:17 (I am the Lord, I change not... the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness — the immutability of God, v. 6); Heb. 13:8 (Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever — the unchanging Lord, v. 6); Zech. 1:3; Mal. 3:7 (turn ye unto me... and I will turn unto you — return unto me and I will return, v. 7); Lev. 27:30–32; Mal. 3:8–10 (the law of tithes, prove me now herewith — vv. 8–10); Gen. 7:11 (the windows of heaven were opened — opened for blessing rather than flood, v. 10); Ps. 73:1–17 (the prosperity of the wicked and the temptation that serving God is vain — answered in vv. 14–18); Ex. 19:5; 1 Pet. 2:9 (a peculiar treasure — segullah... a peculiar people — God's jewels, v. 17); 3 Ne. 26:2 (the Father commanded these words be given to future generations — the reason this Malachi chapter is preserved, v. 1).*”